

MELODY

JOURNEY'S END - BOOK TWO



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This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only. Nothing in this book should be interpreted as Blushing Books' or the author's advocating any non-consensual sexual activity.

CHAPTER 1



“Damn,” Melody muttered under her breath. “Damn,” she repeated a bit louder and with enough venom to poison the banker stationed behind the counter. She began to close the door, but her arm felt a more violent urge. With a swift motion that started at her shoulder and traveled down to a hard twist of her wrist, the door slammed shut. Windows rattled. Glass shook. For just a minute, Melody expected the large plate glass window with the words *Ford’s Bank, established in 1875*, to shatter into pieces and crash in splinters to the ground. She was a trifle disappointed when this did not, in fact, occur.

“Damn it all to Hell,” she declared through clenched teeth. She glared at the banker who stood wide eyed, with his mouth hanging open on the other side of the barrier of intact glass. She didn’t believe that little weasel. No money. How could there be no money?

“You got something against that door, miss? You seem to hold it quite a grudge,” a deep voice drawled from the street. A chuckle rumbled somewhere in his wide chest. “When I know you a bit better, I’ll tell you what happens to the ladies of Journey’s End

when they swear." He squinted as if to get a better look at her flushed face. "Better yet, I might show you."

"That banker," she stabbed a finger at the man watching from the safety of the building, "tells me our ranch account is empty." Disdain dripped from her words like maple syrup off a pancake. "He's a rotten liar." Melody waved a paper at the banker.

"Is that the account?" the man asked.

"Yes, at least he says it is." She snorted and shot a hot glare through the window before returning her attention to the solid wall of man standing with his hands on his hips. His mouth was turned down in a slight frown, and intelligent eyes the color of twilight held her in a steady gaze.

The cowboy dragged his hat from his head and bobbed a friendly nod. "Name's Mitchell McBride, but folks just call me Mitch."

"Melody Williams." She extended her hand and waited. Not all men would shake a woman's hand. Her brother said a handshake was meant for business, and she didn't need to worry her pretty head about business. She could depend on him. If she had it to do again, she'd pay attention to business and depend upon herself. When the man engulfed her small hand in his larger one, she rewarded him with a smile. Truth be told, it wasn't more than a grimace, but she'd had one hell of a week.

"Seems to me you could use a cup of coffee and a slice of pie," Mitch stated. He mounted the stairs and extended an arm toward the dusty street. "Will you join me?"

Melody looked the man over from tip to toe. His hair was the color of burnished red and brushed the collar of his plaid shirt. He looked down at her as he waited for an answer. She liked that mighty fine. Being tall for a woman, she often did the looking down. Tipping her head back to meet his eyes was a treat. Her stomach tightened for no reason she could figure, and she fidgeted for a second or two.

"Yes, thank you, I will." Melody gave the bank a parting glower

before slipping her hand through his proffered elbow. They walked down the stairs and crossed to the café.

Melody looked about the little room. Clean white curtains billowed at the window, and red and white checked cloths covered the tables. She smiled her pleasure as Mitch guided her to a table by the window and helped her into her seat.

A young girl with a long braid hanging down her back approached. "Hello, Deputy," she murmured. Her face went into competition with the red tablecloth. "What can I get you?"

"Two coffees and two slices of pie, please, Sarah." He smiled at the blushing youngster.

"I'll be right back." The girl rushed toward the back of the café.

"Deputy?" Melody snarled.

"You got something against the law as well as bankers?" Mitch asked.

"Not if they'd do their jobs, damn it," she replied.

"Now, stop that swearing." He gave a frustrated sigh. "The sheriff of this town, Matt Cullen, is a good man and a fair one. I haven't ever heard a complaint. I wouldn't have agreed to work with him if I thought different. Same goes for the banker. Until I saw you staring daggers at the man, we have never had a person upset with how he handled their money and accounts."

He narrowed his eyes while lifting a single eyebrow. Melody didn't know how he did both things at once, but the combination sent a stab of molten heat racing up one leg and down the other. She squirmed.

The young waitress hurried to their table sloshing coffee on her tray with every quick step. "Here's your coffee and pie, Deputy." She set the items on the table and waited.

"Thank you, Sarah," Mitch said. When she didn't move on, he added, "I'll let you know if we need anything else." With one last longing look, she moved away.

"Well, Deputy, that child has a crush on you," Melody observed.

"I know it." He frowned. "But she is a child. I don't think she's

fifteen until next winter. She blushes when I come in, but that's as far as it goes. If she gets bolder, I'll have a word with her pa." Mitch lifted his cup to his lips and took a sip. "It's not too hot. Go ahead." He nodded at her untouched cup.

"When I need help with hot beverages, I'll let you know, Deputy," Melody snapped.

"Hold your horses, girl." Mitch set his cup down with a clatter. "First you cuss out the banker. Then you're angry at the law, and now you're mad that I don't want you to get burned." His mouth drew into a hard, straight line. "Seems to me you have trouble with your temper. If you were mine, I'd help you rein it in." He nodded his agreement with the sentiment.

"Well, I'm not yours," Melody steamed. "That's a fact I can be grateful for."

"All right. We can agree. You're not mine." He took another sip of coffee and loaded his fork with a healthy bite of cherry pie. "Let's cool off," Mitch suggested. "We're here for coffee and conversation. I was worried about you over at the bank. I thought I might be able to help. Lend a friendly ear at least. I don't want to argue."

Melody took a shuddering sigh, and her shoulders curled as if to protect her heart. "I'm sorry, Mitch. You don't deserve my anger, but I think it's all that keeps me going. If I let go of it, I'm afraid I'll collapse."

Mitch laid a large, work-roughened hand over hers. "I'm a good listener if you'd care to talk."

"I told the sheriff in Oakville, but he wouldn't do anything." A tear trailed down her pale face.

"I can't help what happens in Oakville." He shrugged. "Tell me."

She wasn't sure if that was a request or an order. Either way, it would be a relief to share her troubles.

"Last Wednesday night, I was asleep when I heard shouting and what sounded like a fight in my brother's study. I ran downstairs. A man was standing over my brother with his fist raised. From the look of Clay's face, he'd taken quite a beating already. The man

smashed that fist into my brother's jaw and said, 'You have until Friday to get that money, Williams. Sell the ranch.'

"I was so frightened. I slipped behind the door and prayed he wouldn't see me." She twisted the handkerchief into a wet ball.

My bother said, "I can't sell, my sister's name is on the deed. The land is tied up until..."

"Quit whining about your sister," the man said.

"I'll never forget his voice. Never," Melody declared. "I tried to get Clay to talk to me the next day, but he wouldn't tell me how much money he needed. He was nervous and jumped at every noise. Friday came, and we were both scared. Clay told me to go on up to bed, but I sat by my window and waited." Tears streamed down her face and soaked the tablecloth. "I must have dozed off. The sound of a gun being fired brought me awake and out of the chair. I ran downstairs. My brother lay slumped over his desk with a pistol in his right hand and a bullet in his brain. The window was open, and I saw a man riding away."

"I'm sorry, Melody. Lord have mercy." Mitch took hold of her hand and rubbed his thumb over her knuckles. "What did you do?"

"I sat with Clay the rest of the night. He wasn't a strong man and maybe he wasn't very wise, but he was my brother, my half-brother, and I loved him." She wiped at her face with a handkerchief Mitch pulled from his pocket. "After Pa died, everything seemed fine for a while. But then Clay started staying away from the ranch. Sometimes for two or three days at a time, and when he came home, he smelled of booze and looked even worse than he smelled. He was in trouble, but I didn't know what to do." She shrugged her shoulders and dropped her chin to her chest. "As soon as the sun came up, I sent one of our hands into Oakville to get the sheriff," she continued.

"Sheriff?" Mitch barked his surprise. "Not the doctor or undertaker?"

"No, I needed the sheriff," she declared. "He came. He walked in the room and took one look before saying my brother had

committed suicide. He saw the gun in Clay's hand, and the note that said *Sorry, Melody*. He didn't want to hear the rest."

"The rest?" Mitch repeated. His eyes rested on her face, comforting and cool.

"Yes, the rest. I told him about the man I'd seen riding away. He said it was easy to imagine things in the dark. I pointed out that the gun was in my brother's right hand, and I explained how that would never be."

"Why not?" Mitch asked.

"My brother was left-handed. If he'd committed suicide, the gun would not be in his right hand. It would be in his left." She swiped at her tears with the back of her hand.

Mitch moved his chair closer, picked up the wad of handkerchief lying next to her uneaten pie, and mopped her face.

"It sounds mighty suspicious," he agreed.

"Since we live on the other side of the river, the Oakville sheriff has the final word," she whispered. "He said I had no recourse. Those were his words. No recourse."

"That's true enough. It's his jurisdiction," he agreed.

"My brother was murdered, Mitch, murdered." She brought a small fist down on the table with a thump. Coffee cups rattled in their saucers, and his fork gave a little jump. "I aim to find out who killed him and why. I'll see him punished if it's the last thing I ever do. I'll see to it. I swear I will."